Chumming the Waters

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Chumming the Waters

by SaitouLover

Summary

Will let Hannibal hold him, let him silently apologize once again for condemning Will to that horrid place. It had been a year and a half since he last saw the drab grey of its bricks and bars, but that hadn't been nearly enough to put it behind him. He'd forgiven Hannibal, but he hadn't forgotten. Every once in a while, usually on the nights Hannibal stayed over, Will dreamed of the prison. He envisioned steel cages and cold, dripping basements. Will often dreamt that the madness that pervaded every inch of the place seeped into him and filled him till he capsized from it.

He had nightmares he never left, and his waking life was the dream.

Notes

This is not A/B/O. Here, it’s normal for men to be able to carry as well... just far less common. I’m thinking that for every 1000 female pregnancies there’s one male pregnancy. Enough that it would turn some heads but not enough to be considered freakish. Heterosexual pregnancies are still the overwhelming majority because the majority of men who can carry are straight. It can take people by surprise because men don’t have external menstruation like women.

Will grew up in a time and place where it wasn’t openly acceptable, and so doctors and schools didn’t screen for the ability. Things have changed since then but Will never felt the need to get himself checked.

Just suspend your sense of belief and go with it. You get a cute Graham-Lecter baby out of it.

Chapter 1

The Saturday morning after Will's late-night admission was a lazy one. Hannibal forwent breakfast to remain curled up in bed with Will, which pleased the younger man. After the empath woke, the two rested under warm blankets for several hours, conversing and trading languid kisses. It was nice to finally have time together that couldn't be interrupted at any moment by a well-meaning Abigail or a crying BG.

Still, by the time the antique clock on the nightstand chimed eleven-thirty, the two men were pleasantly kiss-swollen, and Will's stomach was growling. Hannibal chuckled at the sound and slid out of bed. Will followed shortly after as the other man glided from the room to start an early lunch. The younger male trailed the elder and curled up in the kitchen armchair to watch the upcoming show.

He wasn't disappointed.

Hannibal chopped, diced, and stirred his way around the kitchen, and Will knew he was showing off when he flambéed thin slices of steak in brandy. Finally, lunch was ready after an hour, and the two ate at the counter, standing next to each other and brushing their shoulders. It was soothing, and Will was heartened that the awkwardness that lingered since BG was born had gone, at least for the moment. The peace bolstered Will. Will finished chewing and began to cut another piece of steak.

"Reviewing last night's conversation... leave Alana alone." Blue eyes remained down as he spoke.

Hannibal paused but didn't say anything, a silent demand for Will to expand.

"It's too high a risk. You know it's too high a risk," Will said. "I know you've been thinking about it, but you can't go after her. People still remember, Hannibal."

Knowledge of the hospital argument hadn't remained in the hospital. Somehow, and Will blamed Hannibal, Beverly found out about Alana's visit and their bitter confrontation. Which,

understandably, meant all of Quantico knew soon after. The female psychiatrist hadn't been very popular for a while. Even Jack had made his displeasure known, siding *with* Will for once and not against him.

The biggest and most valid concern Will had was that they'd be the first questioned about her disappearance. And that was assuming Alana only went missing. God forbid Hannibal make an example of her by making her an example. They had barely convinced the world that Chilton was the Chesapeake Ripper. The last thing Will needed was for Hannibal to ruin all of his hard work by displaying Alana publicly. They might as well hang a sign around her neck with the Ripper's signature and a fucking smiley face for shits and giggles.

"Leave Alana alive," Will firmly reiterated, as if reprimanding a misbehaving pup.

Instead of side-stepping the issue as he had the previous night, Hannibal merely rolled his eyes before giving the slighter man an agreeing nod. While there was no verbal guarantee, Will knew Hannibal had capitulated on this issue. It eased a tension that Will hadn't noticed until it was gone.

"Alright then," Will said, changing the topic. "What are our plans for tonight?"

Hannibal took their empty plates and carried them to the sink to wash them. "Dinner and a show."

The empath picked that simple answer apart with an ease that only long exposure to Hannibal's horrible sense of humor granted. "You didn't tell me to bring a tux for the opera, so shouldn't that be 'a show and then dinner'?"

Hannibal paused his washing and glanced over his shoulder with a charmed look in his eye. Will huffed a laugh and crossed the kitchen to plaster himself to his monster's back, a mirror of the previous night. Hannibal sighed in pleasure before returning his attention to the dishes.

"You would be correct," the older man said once he placed the last piece of cutlery in the dish drainer. "A show and then dinner."

"No hunting?" It was meant to sound indifferent, but Will's uncertainty tainted the words and made the empath cringe at the neediness he heard in his voice.

Hannibal hummed a single note and turned in Will's embrace until he could wrap an arm around Will and lace a hand through the younger man's thick curls. Once he was pleased with the picture their embrace painted, Hannibal smiled and gently kissed Will's eyebrow.

"No, mylimasis. I will find nourishment enough in your presence. There is no need to lay siege on your mental forts."

"I'm not sick anymore, Hannibal," Will argued contrarily. "I won't lose myself."

"Will."

His name, said in so light a tone, made the empath stop and give his full attention to the killer holding him. What he found staring down at him was the focused regard of both Hannibal and the Ripper, affection from both aspects blended in a way that had Will's knees going weak. Red eyes were soft, and there was an honest geniality about the taller man. Will got the impression Hannibal was three steps ahead and patiently waiting for him to catch up.

"Oh," he said softly, a flash of understanding sparking a warmth in his belly.

"Oh," Hannibal mimicked affectionately. "You see now?"

Will could only nod, still reeling from finally realizing what Hannibal had been attempting to convey ever since Will set the terms for their reunion.

Hannibal wanted Will Graham. He wanted the rude, antisocial man that liked dogs better than people and preferred whiskey to any form of socializing. After everything, all the poking, and prodding and plans upon plans, Hannibal realized he desired Will's ability to *understand*

over his ability to *become* . Hannibal didn't want a duplicate of himself. He simply wanted Will.

And the Ripper felt the same, as far separated from Hannibal as one side of a coin was from the other. Apart yet together.

The killer yearned for a companion. Ripper needed an audience, someone to see and understand him. That person needed to fill in the gaps and cracks that blemished Hannibal's person-suit, not only a master craftsman to fix structural issues but also to flawlessly draw the eye away from those imperfections. But, of course, that wasn't possible if their faults were one-in-the-same. Besides, what purpose did having another of himself serve when he celebrated his uniqueness? The Chesapeake Ripper was an artist among men because no other could paint with his brutal brush strokes.

That made it all more obvious that it wasn't in their offspring's best interest to be cared for by a monster of his ilk. Gabija needed a nurturer raising her, not a sadist. The Ripper looked upon his flesh and blood and saw, first, opportunity. A blank canvas cut from the very same bolt he had been, carefully stored away until fate followed one of her whims and tugged it free to experiment. So much potential just curdling under delicate skin. Intellectually, it was wrong to consider his child in such a manner. Still, he couldn't help but see a potentiality that he could shape into his supreme legacy, something to carry on the hunt years after his demise. It was horrifically fantastic to envision.

However...

Emotionally, he wanted his daughter to be surrounded and smothered in as much altruistic love as humanly possible to combat the selfishness and destructiveness inherent to every cell that was his own. Because while she was half the perfection of himself, Gabija was also a product of Will. *Will, his sweetheart. Will, the one person in all his long life to see him, to know him and accept him all of him how was it possible to want their child to be everything like Hannibal like the Ripper and nothing like them if it made her the spitting image of Will how could he ruin something that was half his dear heart and turn it black like them how was it possible that he could love someone so selflessly when he wanted all of him to himself and to destroy anyone that dared to look upon him with anything less than worship how-*

"Will!"

Will gasped and broke out of Hannibal's embrace with a panicked swipe of his arms. The brunette jerked backward, nearly tripping over his feet in haste to get some distance between them, and stumbled into the island counter. A couple of seconds later, the empath was on the other side, gripping the steel barrier with shaking hands and staring at an equally shocked Hannibal. Fear made the younger man's lungs tremble and his heart pound for several long minutes while he forced himself to calm down.

Hannibal stayed by the sink the entire time it took Will to regain his composure. Will knew the physician in the older man wanted to check on him; the lover wanted to comfort and reassure him. But the psychiatrist knew Will needed physical distance to help rebuild emotional distance, so he did the best thing for Will he possibly could and stayed away. That didn't stop maroon eyes from filling with worry or the tiny ticks that indicated he was fighting his urges to move closer.

"What just happened?" Hannibal asked once Will felt less likely to slip into a panic attack.

Will took one last, deep breath and exhaled shakily before he ran a hand through his sweaty hair and simply said, "empathy."

The doctor tilted his head a fraction in consideration, barely noticeable. "You have never gone that deep."

"I have," the younger man contradicted. "It was just that no one was ever around."

The head tilt was noticeable this time. "That is why you always cleared the room?"

"It made it easier." Will cleared his throat and looked away from the other man, embarrassed. "I'm more receptive than usual when reading a scene. There's less chance of getting lost in strong emotions when there's no one around to project them."

"Vulnerable," Hannibal countered, his expression beginning to close off. "Jack knew this could happen?"

Will gave a shaky nod. "That's why he always cleared the scene when I asked."

Displeasure was evident on the other man's face, red eyes dark and heavy. "And I made it worse with my manipulations, with allowing the encephalitis to continue."

Hannibal didn't ask. Will shrugged jerkily. "You knew I empathized, Hannibal."

"I understood you could deduce what emotions were felt, causing your own emotions to mirror them while in the moment. However, seeing it in its truest form demonstrated just how... fetid it can be."

"Fetid?" Will felt anger stir in his gut.

"Strong, potent, dangerous. Many words that don't do your gift justice." Hannibal took a step toward Will and held his gaze somberly. "Intellectually, I knew what to expect. Seeing what it truly does to you when surprised is very different, Will."

"You knew, though," Will pushed, angry at the older man's hypocrisy. "You encouraged it. You wanted me to understand you."

"Yes," Hannibal admitted freely. He slowly approached the counter and rounded it, careful not to encroach too far into Will's space. "But I failed to understand you in return. And even if I had, I didn't love you then as I do now. You were an opportunity, momentary entertainment. Mylimasis, I just held you in my arms as you ceased to exist."

The weight of anguish and distress in Hannibal's words was heart-stopping, and it froze Will cold. He pushed any anger down to observe the doctor with an unbiased eye and felt his stomach drop at the unadulterated fear he saw. Everything he thought he knew was shaking beneath him; its foundations were eroding and dissolving. There was a brief moment of vindictiveness, an ugly 'good' whispered at the back of his mind, but it didn't last in the face of such genuine upset.

Hannibal truly did not understand what Will's mind did to him, what his empathy took from him without returning. Like all the other psychiatrists and psychologists around him, Doctor Lecter thought his gift simply gave him the ability to act as a mirror, shining back what others cast out. While that was the case, no one understood that his empathy was only contained to that superficial level because of the numerous barriers Will always put up to protect himself. Without protections, Will was a two-way panel barely disguising a writhing black hole.

"Will Graham died in my kitchen," Hannibal murmured, unable to keep his distance. He carefully touched Will's shoulder and cheek. "Just for a moment. And it was I that took his life."

There was a thrum to the tone, thick and suffocating, and Will swallowed roughly before he embraced the other man. He wrapped his arms around Hannibal's shoulders and tugged him close. Fingers reached up to stroke silky hair, and blue eyes met red.

"I'm alive, Hannibal. You'd need to do much more than overwhelm me to snuff me out. I just wasn't prepared. I let all my defense fall when I should have kept some up. It's not your fault, and I'm fine. I'll be fine. That won't happen again."

Hannibal breathed, an illusion of calm to anyone but Will, and nodded. "I found myself upset at the notion of being the cause of your demise."

"Good," Will said, meaning it. He let his friend go and took a step back. "Now, who's for dinner?"

_____

Jeff Green was an electrician with a reputation for vaguely shoddy work and even worse customer service. Years ago, he provided a free estimate to a newly-minted psychiatrist looking to refit an old house as his new home. The space was large with good bones, and while it would be labor-intensive to relay outlets and wiring, it would also be a relatively simple job. Easy to add a few 'unknown' spanners into the work that would raise the cost by a couple of thousand grand. He examined the walls, leaving noticeable nicks and gouges, and scuffed the floorboards with a dirty boot. Then, after handing over his business card and promise for a quote if called, he stopped and spat on the stoop on his way out.

Now, Will watched him squirm in the basement of that very same house.

Green was an unsightly blemish against the pristine stainless steel and plastic under the bright light of the cold cinderblock space. The man had not prudently used the years since his unwitting self-introduction to Death. Instead, age had been allowed to weather him until his skin was leathered and splotchy. Fat had consolidated into a substandard gut that bounced in an off-putting manner as he struggled. Sweat-matted thin brown hair and normal brown eyes were wide with fright, pupils blown wide as Will slowly stepped into Hannibal's sanctum.

Upon entering the space cordoned off by walls and a roof of plastic sheeting, the most apparent thing Will noticed was that Hannibal's victim was strapped to a modified autopsy table. He was nude of everything but his fear, slim bindings on his wrists and ankles and wider ones around his thighs and chest. Hannibal must have taken him over 24 hours previously by the stench of the place. Will wrinkled his nose at the unpleasant odor.

After a quick observation of center stage, the empath saw the multiple trays surrounding the man. They held tools Hannibal would require throughout the night and glinted menacingly under the fluorescents. Even from where Will stood, it was blatant that something horrible was about to happen.

Will turned his head to the left and said over his shoulder, "Did he do any actual work on your house?"

Hannibal carefully trod down the stairs, carrying a chair from the dining room. He placed the wooden furniture outside the plastic in a darker corner of the basement, and Will made his way toward it. The psychiatrist spent an extra few seconds fidgeting it into place before turning his attention onto Will.

"Of course not." There was indignation there, much to Will's amusement.

"Good. That's one less link back to you."

Hannibal didn't respond, which made the empath raise a questioning eyebrow.

"You're not upset," Hannibal noted curiously.

It was easy to suss out what he meant. "You took him before our conversation last night. So it wouldn't be fair to hold this against you."

"Mylimasis."

The doctor smiled, a tiny genuine thing that had Will wanting to smile back. They locked stares for an extended moment before Hannibal ushered Will into his seat and procured a blanket out of nowhere. He unfolded it with a sharp snap and laid it over the empath's legs. Will looked at him incredulously.

Hannibal frowned. "It gets cold out of the direct light down here. I do not want you to become chilled."

Will raised his eyebrow again and turned his gaze to a muffled and screaming Jeff Green. Hannibal's frown deepened.

"This is about us sharing ourselves in a controlled environment," Hannibal said, "I would like you to see everything there is to me, but not at the expense of your comfort. You will tell me if it becomes too difficult for you, either physically or emotionally."

That garnered an eye roll from Will, and the younger man stood, holding the blanket so it wouldn't fall to the ground. Then, he reached over and pulled Hannibal to him by his shirt and placed a kind kiss on the corner of the other man's mouth.

"Hannibal, thank you for finally thinking about my needs and comfort, but I'm not going to fall apart by watching you kill. I've already seen you kill. I saw you every time I reenacted one of the Ripper's scenes, and it was at my worst. So if anything, this will be easier."

Hannibal's frown deepened slightly, red eyes darkening in thought. "This morning, you-"

Will cut him off. "Was a one-off and had nothing to do with murder. I was just surprised, is all. I'll be fine." He could tell Hannibal wasn't swayed because he continued. "But if it turns out I'm not, then I'll let you know."

"You're very accepting of this."

It was as close to a silent accusation as Hannibal was going to get right then, not wanting to upset Will and ruin the empath finally coming around to accepting him. Will barely caught the scoff before it escaped him. Instead, he shook his head in exasperation.

"Am I happy you've abducted a man to butcher him for being rude? No." The screams from the electrician in question increased in volume, but the two men ignored him. "But it's already done. I'm not naive, Hannibal. I know perfectly well you can't just let him go. I also know that you promised to consider my feelings on the matter. Think of this as a one-time indulgence."

Will continued before Hannibal could say anything. "I'm here to watch, Hannibal, nothing more. I won't help you kill this man. To me, his crimes don't merit death."

Instead of responding verbally, Hannibal merely raised his hand and caressed Will's cheekbone with long, strong digits. Will turned his face into the touch, and Hannibal followed the silent command and cupped Will's entire check. The empath nuzzled the doctor's palm and gave a faint upturn of lips.

Hannibal stared at him in intense concentration, and it felt to Will as if he were trying to memorize the moment. It wouldn't surprise Will; Hannibal was sentimental about the most inappropriate things. He could shrug away the memory of sex as if it were nothing but a dinner or quipped conversation rated as an item for his memory palace.

"Go," Will said with a nudge. He pulled away from Hannibal and situated the blanket over his lap as he retook his seat. "You promised a show. While I'm not peckish yet, I'd still like to eat sometime today. We still have to talk about how you're getting rid of the body."

That garnered a smirk and automatic obedience from the man beside him. As the doctor walked away, Will took a fortifying breath. He shoved any empathy for Green away before erecting his mental forts to keep it out. There wasn't anything he could do to save the man, and he wasn't going to ask Hannibal to stop. Green was already dead; his breathing and shrieks didn't change that.

Will took another breath and observed as the man he was so familiar with melted seamlessly into the monster he knew just as well. He sat back in the shadowed corner where Hannibal had situated him, under the blanket Hannibal wrapped him in, and readied himself to watch the show Hannibal would put on for him. Will wouldn't pretend to be blind to the artistry and, yes, even the beauty of Hannibal's performance. He would be the audience Hannibal yearned for, providing the acceptance needed but not yet attained.

There was a great deal Will would do to protect his family, even if it meant from themselves.

Chapter 2

Before Will realized it, fall had rolled into winter, and with it came an entirely new problem of horrifying levels.

"No," Will said fervently, instilling as much resolve into that one word as humanly possible.

Hannibal sighed. "Will-"

"No," Will said again, quieter this time in deference to the patrons around them.

They were in a restaurant, one of the more popular ones downtown that even Hannibal couldn't turn his nose up at. While the food was not his own, Hannibal allowed for Will's need to dine out, baring it with a grace that spoke more to his willingness to keep Will happy than any desire to be seen out and about. It wasn't a common occurrence but not so rare as to cause surprise whenever the psychiatrist declared they had reservations.

They were having dinner with the Crawfords this time, an early Christmas celebration. It was their first outing shared with someone outside their immediate circle. Jack and Bella hadn't arrived yet, having texted Hannibal about being stuck in traffic, so the two men decided to take their reservation instead of giving it up. Hannibal ordered wine, and Will ordered appetizers he could vaguely recognize.

"It is perfectly normal," Hannibal pushed. He continued as Will began to scowl. "I do not know why you are so against it."

"Your instinctive urge is to turn things like this into a circus. An elaborate show to twist everyone up until they're singing your praises and begging for an encore. It is not so much about the actual reason as it is about you."

Hannibal frowned slightly, meeting Will's frustrated gaze with his own bland one. "You are merely trying to avoid any personal interaction that has even the slightest chance of

discomfort for you."

Before the younger man could respond, the arrival of Bella and Jack interrupted them. While ill, Bella was beautiful in her sleek red dress, and even Jack had put effort into his appearance. The restaurant was not a formal establishment - Will refused to spend his rare evenings out dressed up like a ken-doll, and Hannibal simply had to live with that - but a certain level of dress was still expected. In one of his more sedate outfits, Hannibal's dark tartan with a handkerchief matched the same deep blue of Will's trousers.

Both men stood to meet their dinner companions, smiles passing effortlessly between the four of them. Bella was seated first, next to Hannibal and across from Will, and Jack sat next to his wife. The group was nestled farther away from the bustle of the restaurant's main floor, a nod to Will's sensibilities. As a result, speaking at an appropriate level was easier without straining.

"You're looking well, Bella," Will said before Hannibal could take over the conversation.

Bella shot him a knowing look and smiled again. "Today is a good day."

"That is good to hear," Hannibal praised. "I would not have cared for you to force yourself out on a bad one."

The beautiful woman tipped her head towards Hannibal and gracefully placed her napkin on her lap. "I hope we're not too late."

"Traffic was horrible," Jack jumped in, taking a sip from his water glass. "Apologies for that. There was an unexpected accident that caught us by surprise. We were stuck at a standstill before we could get off at the next exit."

Hannibal shook his head. "Accidents, by definition, are unexpected. It is not your fault that others cannot drive."

"So," the FBI agent said with a grateful nod. He clapped his hands and grinned. "What's for dinner?"

Hannibal motioned for the young woman assigned to their table, and she quickly approached with menus for their perusal. Bella ordered a vegetarian pasta dish; Jack ordered steak. Will found it fascinating how different the couple was. He and Hannibal ordered salmon and Chilean Sea Bass, respectively.

"What were you discussing when we showed up? If you don't mind me asking?" Jack prodded. "It seemed pretty intense."

Hannibal sighed, pained, and Will glared at him.

"It will be our first anniversary in January," Hannibal explained. "I would like to celebrate it."

"A dinner party," Will clarified sullenly, giving Hannibal a dark look. Then, he turned his attention to Bella, knowing that Jack would provide absolutely no sympathy or support.

Jack couldn't hide the twitch of his lips, and Bella smacked her husband's arm. She looked back to Will and gave him a commiserating expression. "One year is a special thing. Most couples want to celebrate it."

Hannibal nodded, pleased. "Exactly. I find myself frustrated that Will is so adamant that a simple dinner will do."

Bella met the psychiatrist's gaze unflinchingly. "Sometimes that's the best gift of all, simplicity. I know you enjoy the company of others on special occasions. Still, Will obviously believes that this occasion is more memorable when only you two celebrate it. More people don't always make it better."

Will sighed gratefully, thanking Bella for putting to words what he'd struggled with explaining for the past hour since Hannibal brought it up.

Jack made a face. "I don't want to put my two cents in where they don't belong, but Hannibal's opinions also matter, Bella."

Hannibal cut in, disrupting any potential argument before it could begin. "I understand why Will dreads the thought." He met Will's gaze. "The company I keep outside my immediate circle can be shallow and catty. They enjoy gossip as much as a good glass of wine. I do understand the wish to avoid that, but I wish to kill two birds with one stone, as they say."

Will frowned. "Are they still being difficult?"

"Some," Hannibal admitted with a faint scowl.

"Difficult?" Jack asked. "Who's being difficult? About what?"

Will shook his head in exasperation and simply said, "Me."

When he didn't explain further, Hannibal smoothly inserted himself. "There are still some that are wagging tongues and making certain engagements a trial of patience. They disapprove, I'm afraid."

"About your and Will's 'conversations'?" Bella asked carefully.

Everyone on friendly terms with either Hannibal or Will knew their prior, unofficial doctor/patient relationship was a touchy subject. At best, referring to it as conversations would keep the peace. At worst, as with direct insinuations, it got exceedingly ugly. Both men were protective of each other, and no one wanted their focused ire directed toward them. Jack had been front-row center for the fallout of Alana's misconduct report to the licensing board. Intellectually, people had known Lecter couldn't always be as polite and well-tempered as he usually was. Still, the sheer breadth of cold rage he could summon was awe-inspiring.

And none of it had been for himself. That had been what had struck people the most. Every ounce of his vengefulness had been for Will. Alana Bloom had grossly overstepped professional boundaries and had unintentionally hurt Will while doing so. Hannibal hadn't cared about losing his license. He had cared about someone threatening Will. Hannibal struck back so quickly and efficiently that most people who knew him raised an eyebrow and distanced themselves from Alana post haste.

Only those closest to the fallout saw the second half of it.

Where Hannibal hadn't been concerned for himself, for his livelihood, Will had been. Will not only had absolutely no issue with going to war for the psychiatrist, but he also had no problem using every weapon he had at his disposal to win. Better yet, to make a point while doing so.

While Hannibal had been vengeful, Will had been just plain vindictive.

Alana had nearly lost her license in response to her attack against Hannibal. Not even 72 hours after being lodged, the board unanimously dismissed the case against Hannibal in one breath and opened another against Alana in the next. The entire thing was silently spearheaded with Will's blessing by his friend and attack dog, Celeste Lambert. The complaint, filed by Hannibal, had been a lit match that Celeste had expertly fanned into a crackling fire. The only reason Alana hadn't lost her license was that Celeste bowed to Will's request to spare her that final blow. Celeste acquiesced, but not before she got her pound of flesh on Will's and Hannibal's behalf.

Bella quite liked her.

Jack was a little terrified.

So friends knew to tread softly around that subject. It wasn't sensitive, both men were too confident in their relationship to be defensive, but it did provoke protectiveness. It was incredible to witness, but not something you wanted to be aimed at you.

Will scoffed. "Oh no, that is actually trivial to most of them."

Jack glanced between the two men before he frowned in thought. "Don't tell me it's because Will is male?"

Hannibal's hand seesawed at that. "Partially. I'm afraid some in my social circle are stuck in the past."

"It's me personally," Will said sourly. The table looked at him with varying expressions, and he reluctantly expanded, aggrieved. "They read all about me during the trial. Freddy was very thorough about laying my childhood out in the ugliest and basest of lights. They all think I'm some inbred hick that flunked out of the FBI and got lucky by cuckolding a wealthy Count."

"Not all," Hannibal argued gently, squeezing Will's closer hand. "Quite a few are genuinely interested in meeting you for your own sake, not to satiate their hunger for scandal."

"Enough are," Will bit back, blue eyes darkening.

"And that is why I would like to do this. But, unfortunately, all they have is my word against several horribly biased articles written by a woman who, unfortunately, has the innate gift of influencing the masses."

"You want to parade Will in front of people who think nothing but the worst of him?"

A thin thread of danger lined Bella Crawford's words, and Hannibal turned his full attention to her. His maroon eyes were firm with resolution as he corrected her defiantly.

"I would show a select few of the most influential and easily swayed just how talented and intelligent my best friend and chosen partner is. I would place him on a pedestal and prove just how ugly and baseless their assumptions are. I am just as tired of dealing with them as Will is; for the same reasons. I must still deal with them on a reoccurring basis, however. So if there is a way of rectifying their atrocious behavior and simultaneously making Will's and my lives more bearable, I would take it.

"I am not," Hannibal continued in a lowered tone, his hand tightening over Will's, "trying to humiliate or drag him about like a show pony. On the contrary, I love Will and want to make clear to everyone around us that I am not ashamed. Just the opposite, I want to gloat."

Bella's eyes widened the longer Hannibal spoke, and her mouth was slightly agape by the end of the impromptu speech. Jack seemed just as discombobulated by the intensity of the doctor's words and the honesty in his gaze. It was a rare occasion where Hannibal was so passionate about something that he lost his ever-present collectedness, and the three sitting with him just then felt blown away by it.

Will, reeling internally at the complete honesty he heard in every single one of Hannibal's words, remained frozen for five full seconds before he stood clumsily and pulled Hannibal up with him. He threw a harried "We'll be right back" over his shoulder as he dragged the psychiatrist down the hall to the restroom. After ensuring the room was empty, he flipped the lock and turned to face Hannibal fully.

"You really mean that," he said.

Hannibal frowned briefly, legitimate frustration leaking through his person-suit. "Of course I do."

Will pressed himself into the other man's space and placed his hands on either side of Hannibal's face, holding him still so he could lock gazes. Wide blue eyes examined red, drilling into the other's mind, and Will felt his stomach fill with heat.

"You mean that," he said again, breathily.

There was a significant pause before Hannibal wrapped his arms around Will's waist and pulled the slighter male flush to his chest. He pushed as much honesty into his expression as possible.

"You are my other half, Will. You are perfect, and I have never been, nor will I ever be, ashamed of you. Rather, any pedestal I place you on would barely qualify as such; since you are already so far above them, it would be unnecessary."

Words failed Will at that. While he knew Hannibal loved him, cherished him even, it always seemed to blindside him whenever Hannibal so blatantly and effortlessly said it. Hannibal wasn't ashamed of Will and certainly wasn't ashamed of admitting it. He didn't care who knew because it was a universal truth that no one could disprove or alter. Better yet, Hannibal would make it a challenge, a dare to anyone and everyone to prove Will wasn't worthy of him.

"Celeste is coming," Will declared suddenly.

Hannibal hesitated for only a second before he parsed out Will's meaning, and his eyes lit up. "You will come?"

Will nodded. "Don't make it horrid for me, Hannibal. Keep dinner relatively short and make at least one thing I'd recognize. Don't sit me by anyone horrible or catty."

"I would never, mylimasis."

Hannibal sounded truly offended at that, and Will laughed, bright and open, and kissed Hannibal on the lips. "I love you too."

"Of course you do," Hannibal quipped. "Celeste wouldn't put up with me otherwise."

Will laughed again and pulled away to unlock the door. He turned back to the older man with an outstretched hand. Hannibal took it, and they returned to their table and guests, both happier than they had been before they left it.

Both Crawfords looked worried at a distance. They were leaning close to each other and talking in hushed whispers that no one could hear. As Will and Hannibal approached, the

other couple looked up, and it was evident that they were relieved to see the easy and happy mood instead of what they were probably dreading.

They sat, and Bella touched Hannibal's hand. Then, looking at both men, she apologized. "I'm sorry, you two. That wasn't fair of me."

Hannibal shook his head and took her hand in his. He smiled kindly at her, and Will knew it was primarily genuine. "No, Bella. I am grateful that you care about Will enough to stand up for him. There is always a small part of me afraid of hurting him, of taking him for granted. I'm so very thankful for your willingness to set me straight."

Bella examined the psychiatrist for a long moment, her dark eyes shrewd in their understanding. She returned his smile with equal sincerity and turned her attention to her husband. Her expression softened even further as she grasped Jack's hand, and the big man squeezed the smaller appendage slipped into his. Will felt his throat tighten at the blatant love that passed between the two at that moment and had to look away. For lack of anything better to say, he cleared his throat. That brought the other couple back to the present moment, and they looked at him.

"Because Hannibal is such a sweet talker when he doesn't mean to be," he shot Hannibal a reciprocating smirk, "I agreed to dinner. But only if he tones it down. I'm hoping you can keep him sensible, Bella."

Jack barked a laugh and squeezed his wife's hand. "No worries about that, Will. Just tell her what you want, and she'll make sure it happens. My Bella is fearsome when she wants to be."

Hannibal sighed despondently. "We'll be having McDonald's then."

Will laughed at that, enjoying the mental image of Hannibal presenting trays of delicately arranged Big Macs and chicken nuggets.

"I'll make sure you get to show off," Bella assuaged. "I doubt Will wants to ruin something that you find enjoyable. He just wants to be able to enjoy it as well. Right, Will?"

Will smiled at Hannibal, his heart still brimming with happiness, and reached out to caress one of the man's sharp cheekbones. He didn't answer Bella's question, but that was alright. Hannibal knew what he would have said anyway.

Chapter 3

"I got a call today."

Hannibal looked up at the measured words from where he sat on the living room floor with Braelyn. At almost one year old, BG was ahead of the curve in most baby things, and her elder father wanted to keep it that way. She was sitting in front of a simplified sorter toy, a dozen differently shaped and colored blocks scattered in front of her. She'd been playing with them for half an hour, happily smacking at the ones that matched the color of Hannibal's choosing. He'd been slowly introducing her to shapes, and she appeared to favor triangles the best.

"From whom?" the doctor asked, knowing Will well enough to pick up on the stress the empath was trying to hide.

"Baltimore State."

That got a reaction, understated as it was. After a moment of thought, Hannibal turned back to their daughter and mixed up the blocks. Braelyn shrieked in frustration and smacked Hannibal's fingers. Instead of gently admonishing the baby on manners because it was never too early to learn, he pointed at the now messy pile and tapped a blue cube.

"Blue, Gabija. Then squares."

"Tang!" she argued.

Hannibal shook his head. "Squares. Then Triangles."

"Tang!"

Hannibal wasn't impressed by her persistence. "Braelyn Gabija..."

BG's red eyes widened, and she slapped her hands over her open mouth. "Uh-oh!"

"Uh-oh, indeed, young lady." Hannibal pointed to the blue cube again. "Blue, then squares."

She huffed but grabbed at the block clumsily, shooting her father a glare that was more adorable than effective. Hannibal carefully stood and maneuvered around the small mess of educational tools parading as toys on his way to where Will stood in the doorway.

"What's going on?" he asked Will in a low voice after he reached him.

Will scowled and focused his gaze on the simple blue sweater the man wore instead of answering. It was a Christmas gift from Abigail, bought during a shopping trip to DC. He wandered the malls with her and even let her pull him into Newman Marcus, where she found her present for Hannibal.

"Will," Hannibal said, forcing Will out of his memories.

"The new warden," Will finally answered. "He said Chilton wants to talk to me."

"And what did you say?"

Will stared at the taller man in incredulity. "I said no."

Hannibal hummed and glanced back to check on BG. Satisfied that she was still following instructions, he turned back to Will. "This could be a unique opportunity."

"It could be a trap," the empath argued. "But regardless of which one it is, it's a mistake. I'm not speaking to him."

"You could-"

"I'm not going back, Hannibal!"

That stopped the psychiatrist short, and he quickly shifted his full attention onto Will. Even the softly spoken "uh-oh," from across the room went ignored in favor of weighing the other man's stiff posture and closed-off expression. Will hunched in on himself and looked away from the too-knowing eyes.

"Oh, Will," Hannibal sighed eventually. He slowly pulled Will into his embrace, giving the younger male ample time and room to move away. When he wasn't rebuffed, he pressed Will's face into his neck and ran long fingers through thick curls.

Will let Hannibal hold him, let him silently apologize once again for condemning Will to that horrid place. It had been a year and a half since he last saw the drab grey of its bricks and bars, but that hadn't been nearly enough to put it behind him. He'd forgiven Hannibal, but he hadn't forgotten. Every once in a while, usually on the nights Hannibal stayed over, Will dreamed of the prison. He envisioned steel cages and cold, dripping basements. Will often dreamt that the madness that pervaded every inch of the place seeped into him and filled him till he capsized from it.

He had nightmares he never left, and his waking life was the dream.

"I'm sorry," Hannibal apologized. He sounded sincere, and, at that moment, Will thought he meant it.

"I don't want to go back," Will murmured, his head still pressed into the junction of his partner's shoulder and neck.

"Of course not, mylimasis. I should never have suggested you should. No, you were right to refuse."

They stayed like that for a while, Hannibal holding Will and Will breathing in the steadiness the other man exuded, letting it stabilize him.

"I could go."

Will jerked upright and stared at Hannibal in confusion. "What?"

Hannibal shrugged and loosened his hold before he repeated his offer. "I could go instead."

"Why?" Will asked. "It can't be just because you're curious. Even you aren't careless enough to speak to Chilton out of boredom."

"I don't see the harm."

"Don't see the..." Will poked Hannibal's chest sharply. "You set him up! He knows you set him up."

"What proof does he have? Even Jack has stopped believing him at this point."

"Hannibal," the empath stopped short and took a deep breath. Then, he collected himself and measured his words before laying a hand over his partner's heart. "Why do you feel exposing either of us to that place, in a manner that will be carefully monitored and recorded, would be in our best interest? What good can come out of it?"

With respect to Will's composure and calm questioning of his motives, Hannibal provided a succinct answer.

"There are those that still doubt. However, if we are provided an opportunity to close any remaining avenues Fredrick has, I feel that it would be worth the risk."

Will shook his head. "There is no evidence, Hannibal. And if there is no fresh evidence, we'll be fine. I don't want you to go there."

Hannibal watched him placidly but eventually nodded. He released Will from his embrace but cupped one of the younger man's cheeks, his thumb brushing soft skin. Red eyes stared into blue before Will allowed his eyelids to flutter shut at the tender caress, and the empath turned his face into the smooth, dry palm. Eyelashes fluttered against Hannibal's thumb tip.

"Thank you," Will murmured.

Hannibal tapped his thumb against Will's skin in thought. "If he continues to ask for you, you know someone may very well come to pressure you into it."

It was an ugly truth. One that Will did his best to ignore. While Jack wasn't on the case anymore, others - both in the FBI and Baltimore State - used the same tactics the agent preferred. Strong-arming Will into a meeting would be deemed acceptable if it bought an opportunity to get inside the Chesapeake Ripper's head. Bungling though he may be, Chilton was shrewd enough to use opportunities presented to him... eventually.

Will sighed and nodded. "I know. I was planning on playing the trauma card until they gave up."

The doctor hummed, looking over Will's shoulder while contemplating the problem. "You could," he agreed. "You could also agree to it."

The empath whipped his attention back to Hannibal, and his expression darkened into something ugly. Hannibal cut in before he could even open his mouth.

"On the condition that I speak to him first to ascertain his intentions."

There was a long break where the two men simply met each other's gaze. Finally, Will furrowed his brow in contemplation. "What are you planning?"

"I think, if authorities are so keen to understand the Chesapeake Ripper, they will allow your wish for me to speak with him first. If that would succeed in convincing you." Hannibal smirked vaguely. "And if I wished to use the same trip to face my own attacker for the sake of healing, then that's my business."

Almost against his will, the pendulum swung in Will's mind. The empath submerged himself in Hannibal's design, let the vision swallow him up and pull him down into its dark and bloody hold.

It wouldn't be challenging to arrange. It was a simple matter of instilling just enough vulnerability in Hannibal's voice and posture, and he would be allowed a brief meeting with his would-be murderer. All in the name of confronting his lingering trauma so that he could encourage Will to do the same.

"I need to prove to myself that he did not win. And I need to see his face when he realizes he lost," Hannibal would say so prettily. "I will not be a hypocrite and expect Will to face his monster while I am content to avoid mine."

The challenge would be getting past Matthew's rage at how outclassed he was. After all, by this point, Brown should know full well his lovely would-be mate chose another, chose the very same monster he was sent to kill. How could the news articles about the Ripper's arrest not make their way into the younger man's grasp? A lovely thought, envisioning the look on that face when he read about the beautiful daughter Will eagerly bore. Gabija's paternity would be apparent.

There would be only one interaction. A meeting that lasted mere minutes where every word spoken needed maximization to its full potential. Would Brown understand the game laid out before him? Would he even be willing to play when it was clear he wouldn't receive the prize he so coveted? A few sweet words, then. Something to reward the man for his two years of unwavering silent loyalty.

The easiest way to gain compliance was to acknowledge Hannibal as the victor between the two of them but, in the same breath, also paint him as a leashed pet. One of the great predators, the Ripper, collared and purring for his master's touch. If that didn't sate Brown's thirst, then nothing would. After all, nothing was more beautiful than Will whispering poisoned honey into your veins while you willingly fooled yourself into believing it was blood.

If the message was understood and the game played, they would rid themselves of not one but two of their most significant liabilities.

"You," Will breathed out after he pulled his thoughts away from Hannibal's, "are a nightmare."

Hannibal smiled at him, red eyes full of bloody promise and dark affection. "I aim to please."

The empath laughed shakily, insides twisting pleasantly after the intimate knowledge he had just gleaned from his friend. After a drawn-out moment, Will pulled away from the taller man and stepped back. The minuscule amount of space he gained from that action jumped started his thought process, and he began running the plan through his brain, back and forth, looking for the weaknesses too significant to plan around. But, as Hannibal already knew, they would only have one chance at this, and failure meant drawing attention to the good doctor. Which couldn't happen, not if they wanted their family to remain intact.

"We'll need to plan for the worst," Will said. He met Hannibal's even gaze with a serious expression. "In case this goes wrong."

Will could tell the moment the other man realized what he meant because the doctor frowned. "I cannot and will not drug you. If we wish to do this relatively quickly, we won't have time to build up the levels necessary to prove long-term usage. Any attempt would risk an overdose. I am unwilling to put you through that for a short-term gain."

"We need something, Hannibal," Will argued. "I'm not upending this family if you provoke Brown or say something on camera that warrants a second look. I've given you too much to lose everything. I'm not going on the run with two children and a sixty-year-old woman."

Hannibal smirked at the provoked image but gathered his attention back to Will after a moment. "I'm not saying we don't plan something, mylimasis. Doing nothing is akin to suicide. However, we have to be intelligent about it as well as reasonable. Trying to forge a history of pharmaceutical manipulation isn't feasible with the current timeframe."

The argument made sense, so Will dropped that option and began contemplating alternatives. "I don't know... We've gotten so far past the arrest, and I'm not sure what would work best. People know us, Hannibal, as a couple. They've seen us together and heard about us together. I'm not sure people would buy the 'Abused Spouse' defense. They're not complete idiots."

"We'll think of something, Will," Hannibal assuaged. "What's more important right now are the words needed to persuade your little hawk into hunting."

_____

They decided to go with simplicity over any convoluted and suitably dramatic plan Hannibal preferred. If the worst happened, they would stage a scene that painted Will as the victim and hope for the best.

Before the first hint of active investigation touched them, Will would call Beverly from Hannibal's house. He would explain about finding the basement, about needing to inform Bart Eckelson that they were wrong. So, so wrong. He would suddenly go quiet before shakily whispering that he thought Hannibal was there and hanging up.

Hannibal would hold Will and gut him to the sound of approaching sirens before carefully laying him down on the cold floor and fleeing. The FBI and police would find Will in the kitchen, lying in a pool of his blood that they'd later follow down the hidden stairs into the basement. Will would survive, but he'd have a physical scar to match the mental one of being betrayed by the person he loved dearest.

Hopefully, any suspicion would be negated by the photos found on Will's phone, pictures of the basement and its gruesome content taken as if the phone owner was rushing. Maybe, if the threat from law enforcement was severe enough, Will would text the photos to Beverly to

ensure the illusion that Will was doing his best to expose his partner's guilt in the possible last minutes of his life.

It wasn't perfect, far from it, but it was the best they could think of within the timeframe they allotted themselves.

Hannibal moved hidden funds around and ensured Will memorized each account and false identity the Lithuanian owned. All the while, he peppered Abigail and BG with affection and, Will knew, added as many memories to his mental palace as possible, just in case he needed to remove himself from the country hastily. Nothing was written or spoken outside the hushed privacy of their bedrooms. Things weren't going to be ruined by chance.

"We'll need to formalize the guardianship papers after this," Hannibal prompted a couple of evenings before his scheduled visit to the prison.

He and Will twined together as they lay under the heavy covers of Will's bed. The empath was on his back, his left side pressed into Hannibal's front as the bigger man curled around him. Hannibal's head was propped up by the man's right hand so red eyes could flit over Will's face, sketching an incorporeal painting of his favorite subject.

Will turned to look at his partner. "What?"

"For Braelyn Gabijia. If we have to enact our plan, temporary custody will go to the next of kin. Abigail, while of legal age, is not adopted, and Celeste is not related. The closest relation either of us has is completely undesirable."

That brought an immediate and ugly scowl to the younger man's face. "My mother."

Hannibal nodded and began to trace Will's eyebrows, trying to smooth away the anger. "Though it could be argued that she's not a fit guardian to your child as she abandoned her own."

Will sucked a tooth in agitation before forcing his attention to move on. "What relation do you have?"

"My uncle and his wife."

There was a depth to those words, something veiled that carried the same promise of heavy resentment that Will felt whenever he spoke of his mother. He reached up to push soft blonde hair back from maroon eyes. Hannibal shook his head before the empath could ask, strands falling messily down to cover the older man's expression. Will understood the subtle refusal and let it go, knowing that this was something Hannibal wouldn't speak about, not even to him. Not now, at least.

"We can't make changes now. It would look suspicious. After, though, if nothing goes wrong, we should put our affairs in order. I am disappointed that I forgot about something so important."

"We all forget important things sometimes," Will assuaged as he entertained himself by running his hand through Hannibal's hair and scratching the man's scalp. "You can't be perfect all the time."

"Still, I hope we do not have to enact this contingency. I would hate to have to kidnap my child because Children's Services deemed temporary placement necessary."

The younger man snorted. "It won't get that far. Celeste wouldn't allow it. In the worst-case scenario, custody would go to my mother as the only direct relation. Celeste would make it very clear to her that it would be in name only. Best case, Abigail gets temporary custody as a legal adult already living with the child. I'd hope that Beverly would vouch for her in my stead. Let's stop borrowing trouble, Hannibal."

"Of course, mylamisis."

Hannibal met with Matthew Brown on a Tuesday. He spent less than ten minutes in the echoing and cold reception room, standing six feet away from the caged and quietly seething hawk. But, to everyone watching, then and in the future, all anyone ever saw was a brave man taking back the control he lost that night at the pool.

"I am as innocent as Will is," he later recounted to the empath that night. His voice had faltered perfectly for the cameras, even as his cavernous gaze remained steady on the convicted killer. "And I forgive you for what you did. But I will not spend any more time dwelling on the past. I survived."

"Will deserves better than you," Brown accused.

"Will chose me," the doctor rebutted. "Why he thinks I'm worthy of him, I'll never know. But he decided he wanted me, and it's not my place to say otherwise. He's had enough power stripped from him already; I will never be like that monster... that... that *thing* that stole every ounce of autonomy Will possessed and did so with a smile. I can look back at what you did to me that night and see it for what it was. That's why I forgive you. But don't fool yourself into thinking you're what he deserves, either. No one but Will gets to choose what's best for him.

"You tried to kill a man and got caught. Nothing can excuse that. You'll have to live every day knowing that you failed. Will-" Hannibal had purposefully paused there, making Will's name sound like a veiled continuation of the prior sentence. It was an accusation lurking beneath projected righteousness. "Will is moving on. And maybe, one day, he'll have to face his monster like I'm doing now. But I can truthfully tell him I met you and that I walked away knowing you'll never hurt another innocent person again. Goodbye, Matthew. I hope you realize one day just how rare a second chance you're being given is. Use it wisely. Do better."

His visit to Chilton had been even shorter. The 'Chesapeake Ripper' had glanced at his visitor and clammed up. Hannibal explained Will's reluctance to visit and asked what Fredrick thought he'd gain by continuing to torture the younger man. To the disappointment of their observers, Chilton had wisely remained silent, and Hannibal had duly departed.

Chapter 4

"Finally, Hannibal, another unicorn!"

Will glanced up at the voice from where he was adjusting plates and utensils to prevent social interaction. It was just past seven, and guests had been arriving for the last ten minutes. There was an air of expectancy about the roaming men and women, all dressed as if they were attending the opera instead of a dinner party.

Invitations to the party had been sent out three weeks ago, hand-written by Will's showoff of a monster in smooth black ink on gilded parchment. The invites were capped at fourteen, Bella's common sense winning over Hannibal's need to show off. Nevertheless, everyone responded positively, and the psychiatrist was pleased with himself as news of another of his dinners began to circulate. But, of course, there was quite a bit of envy from those that hadn't garnered a seat at Hanniabl's table.

Abigail, unfortunately, was not attending. Celeste had arranged a visit to Penn University for her, even calling on an old acquaintance to house her for the couple of days she was there. The teen had been hesitant, but Will had encouraged Abigail to go alone to test how well she'd do on her own. If she liked the school, Will and Hannibal would go with her on a second trip to discuss the specifics.

Her absence meant they had to get creative with BG, though. Celeste was attending the party, and Beverly was pulling extra hours on a cold case, which meant their usual babysitters weren't available. So after a brief discussion, Will and Hannibal simply brought their daughter with them, hoping she'd sleep through the party.

After listening to the boisterous woman, curiosity got the better of him, and Will moved out into the foyer. Will wanted to observe the person comfortable enough with Hannibal to speak to the psychiatrist in such a manner. As he rounded the door jam, he glanced over the milling guests and settled on the woman and man Hannibal was standing by.

She was older, like Celeste, beautiful, and well-dressed too. Dazzling jewelry highlighted the sleek, floor-length blue dress and black velvet gloves, and a matching shrug refined it further. There was a grace to her, evident even from across the room, and Will instinctively liked her.

There was a confidence to her, nothing like the normal braggart ego the usual Baltimore gentry wore like a foul perfume. Instead, she seemed kind, even as she poked fun at Hannibal. The man with her, her husband if he remembered correctly, dressed just as smartly. But, where his wife was vivacious, he seemed reserved. There was a quiet calmness to his expression as he stared down at his wife fondly.

"Inspiration has presented itself, Mrs. Komeda," Hannibal said with a small smile.

"Hmm," the woman hummed. "And just where has this 'inspiration' of yours got to?"

Will took that as his cue and approached the duo. Since he was going to have to interact with people here that weren't Hannibal or Celeste, he reasoned, it might as well be someone that would be tolerable. Probably.

"Hiding in the dining room," the empath said, wrapped deep in false civility and charisma. Will offered a hand to Mrs. Komeda and gently shook it when she accepted.

Komeda raked a quick and shockingly knowing gaze over him before red lips stretched into a bright smile. "Well, I can see why Hannibal's been in such a fine mood this past year."

"And why's that?" Will couldn't help but ask her challengingly.

She clearly understood because her smile widened, sending him a wink. "Brains to finally go with the looks, Mister Graham. Hannibal has always appreciated beauty in his partners. Still, he's never been lucky enough to have someone that could keep up."

Will blinked and refrained from looking at Hannibal, knowing that Komeda had to have been around when the doctor was dating Alana. So instead, he gave her a half-puzzled smile and tilted his head. "Have we met?"

"Oh, no," she said with a slight wave. "I just came across you in doing research."

"Research?" Will asked her, his good mood faltering.

"I'm a writer. Murder Suspense. Your monograph helped immensely."

That was a surprise, he thought. Very few people remembered that he wrote that. Even fewer outside forensics. "I'm glad it helped."

"Ellen," Hannibal stepped in smoothly, "I'm afraid I'll have to cut our conversation short. More guests have arrived. Will, will you please show Ellen and Karl into the house? You remember where everything is?"

The last was directed at Komeda, and the woman pouted playfully at the psychiatrist. "Just barely, Hannibal."

Hannibal smiled at her before giving Will a pointed look. The empath obeyed the command and gently touched their guest's elbow. Komeda allowed him to draw her away but then quickly took charge, moving towards the living room with practiced ease that made Will wonder how many of Hannibal's dinner parties she survived. He glanced at her husband, and the man simply shook his head with a little grin.

"I've always adored Hannibal's fashion sense," she said conversationally as they walked down the hall. "Always so dramatic. It didn't surprise me one bit that his house matched the suits."

"That depends," Will shot her a conspiratorial look. "I don't see a lot of plaid and checker here. Do you?"

Komeda snorted and faced forward again. "I can see why he likes you."

There were already a few people in the room, clustered by a small table that housed what Will knew was a framed photo of his family. The empath quickly decided he disliked them shortly after they arrived. They weren't the worst of the lot- none of *those* people were invited- but they were still a challenge to his limited patience. The art director and his wife weren't too bad, and the lobbyist was interesting enough. Still, the retired banker was a whole other matter.

Komeda's arrival seemed to stoke a low-grade fever of excitement in the group as if her appearance was a predetermined signal. For all Will knew, it could be. The woman frequently dined at Hannibal's table when he threw his parties. And he seemed genuinely fond of her, as genuine as Hannibal could ever be with someone outside their family.

"Jessica," Komeda called out when she spotted the only other woman in the group. She crossed over to the taller female and pulled her into a hug. "So good to see you again! It's been, what, a year?"

"Closer to two, I'd think," Jessica smiled, tucking a strand of long blond hair behind her ear.

"Too long, either way. You must make an effort to get out with John more. He's positively dreary without you around."

John, the museum director, rolled his eyes and reached out to shake Mr. Komeda's hand. "Not everyone is a gossip like you, Ellen."

Will was a little surprised at the man's daring. It was clear Komeda was the leader of this particular clique, outside Hannibal, of course, and it usually wasn't a brilliant idea to challenge the one holding the reigns. Even more surprising was that Komeda laughed the rebuke away and grinned at the man.

"Oh, where would all the fun be if I wasn't there?"

The lobbyist, Will thought his name was Henry, chimed in. "Did you see the dining room, Ellen?"

Komeda turned her attention to the thin, brown-haired man. "No. Oh! Has he redecorated?"

"Better, he's expanded the table."

The group lit up in excitement, drawing confusion from the empath. Will wasn't sure why adding a few extra places would be so thrilling. His expression caught Komeda's attention because she smiled and leaned over conspiringly.

"Hannible very rarely has more than nine guests for a dinner party. An unofficial rule of his. I wonder why the break in tradition," she murmured the last part.

"Ah," Will said, nodding his head slightly in realization. Hannibal hadn't included a reason in the invite, wanting to put everyone on the spot during the dinner so he could see their reactions first-hand. "That would be my doing."

"Your doing?" the banker spoke up. "How's that then? Hannibal has a tried and true blueprint for these things of his. I doubt just anyone could get him to change it."

Will shrugged, uncomfortable with the group's attention back on him. "I asked that a few friends we have in common be invited."

"Friends in common?" It was asked with a subtle disbelieving laugh, the older man grinning skeptically as he said it. The other group members shifted slightly, uncomfortable with the veiled insult.

Komeda jumped in to defuse the tension. "Friends from work then?" She asked him.

Will wobbled a hand from side to side. "Jack, my old boss. His wife, Bella, helped Hannibal plan the evening. There's also-"

"Helped?" Henry cut him off. "Since when does he accept help planning these things?"

"Since this one," Will pointed out, pushing down the irritation he felt building.

"And what's so special about this one?" Jessica asked him.

"It's-"

The banker jumped in again. "Oh, I doubt he knows, Jessi."

"Be a dear and go get me a drink, Mark," Komeda ordered, her tone still kind but with an underlying firmness to it.

Mark, the rude banker, paused momentarily and looked to Mr. Komeda, who didn't budge from his wife's side, before rolling his eyes and wandering off to find the bottles of champagne. Will was glad to see him go, even though he knew the man would be back. After he left, Komeda turned to Will and lay a hand on his arm.

"I do apologize for him, Will. He's a bear of a man at times. I'm surprised Hannibal invited him, really."

"He annoys people by breathing," John piped in.

"*Jessi*..." his wife mocked right after. "I've *told* him it's Jessica."

John tipped his head in his wife's direction. "Point proven."

Will shrugged, pretending nonchalance. "He's a politico. Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

"Politico? No, no, that would be me. And I'm a lobbyist," Henry corrected, slightly offended at the presumed insult.

"Politico is a term that's sometimes used for people who like to argue for the sake of arguing. The more controversial the topic, the more they want to talk about it. I've met many at University and the FBI."

Henry seemed to think that over for several moments before he snorted and tipped his glass of champagne in a salute. "On the nose with that one."

Mark returned with Komeda's drink, and the group continued their idle chatter. They carefully steered it away from Will to prevent other conversational faux pas. Eventually, the evening's remaining guests trickled into the room and joined them. Komeda introduced them as they slotted themselves in the open gaps, and Will smiled and tried to remember their names. He did his best to ignore the badly-hidden glances between him and the photo nearby, everyone except for the Komedas biting back the questions they no doubt had. It was evident that curiosity was warring with social etiquette. After all, it wasn't as if he belonged there.

Jack and Bella arrived shortly before seven-thirty and immediately sought Will out to greet him. The agent shook his hand and smiled widely, clapping Will on the shoulder before moving to the side so Bella could sweep in for a hug. There was a fragileness to her now, the cancer starting to take a great enough toll to hamper her mobility. He felt fine tremors in Bella's frame as he returned the embrace. Will was as gentle as possible without drawing people's attention. Though he was worried about her, Bella Crawford was a woman who abhorred pity, no matter her situation. Will wasn't going to draw her ire by acting like she couldn't judge her body's capabilities. If Bella thought she could make it through the night, Will would trust she was right. Besides, the woman was much better company than most other people, including her husband.

Eventually, they grew too numerous and split into smaller groups, chatting about various topics. Will wouldn't have been surprised to find out the common theme was him. It took a little bit, seeing as how he was trying to tune everyone around him out, but Will finally noticed the dying of conversations around him. When he looked around to find the reason, he saw Celeste and Hannibal standing in the living room doorway.

She was clad in an elbow-length green velvet dress, a break from traditional formal wear by only falling to her knees and being far more understated than expected of such an event. Black buttons ran from her belly to the base of her throat. The dress split and formed a shallow collar accentuating a black velvet choker with a large emerald set front and center.

"Well, I'll be damned," one of the others muttered. "That's Celeste Lambert."

Murmurs began to fill the room as Celeste's gaze roamed over her fellow attendees. It was apparent when she spotted Will because her expression notably brightened, and her lips quirked up at the corners in a gentle smile. She glided across the space, effortlessly parting the crowd without a glance in their direction. The room's eyes followed her as she reached Will and effortlessly pulled him down to place a quick kiss on both his cheeks.

"You look very dashing, Will," she complimented him, brushing at the faint smudges she left behind.

It startled the people close by; everyone was shocked that one of the wealthiest socialites on the eastern seaboard knew the empath by name. Komeda was watching the interaction with wide eyes, obviously noticing that Jack and Bella were not surprised by their friendliness.

Will grinned down at his friend, attention now solely focused on Celeste. "I would hope so, what with you being the one to pick the suit out."

Celeste laughed, tipping her head back and letting the light play off the green gem at her throat. "It's not like I steamrolled you into it. You asked for my advice, remember?"

"I asked for a tailor, not a color, fabric, and fit," Will groused playfully.

"But you wanted to make Hannibal realize how lucky he is, didn't you?" Celeste teased him. "So you're welcome."

It was Will's turn to laugh, letting his uncertainty disappear for a while now that he had Celeste here. She'd keep him afloat in this sea of sharks, he knew. While he was busy chuckling, Celeste greeted Bella by carefully gripping her hand and giving Jack a nod. The Crawfords returned the gestures with their own friendly acknowledgments.

After he stopped laughing, Will introduced Celeste to the Komedas. "Celeste, this is Ellen and Karl Komeda, friends of Hannibal's. Ellen, Karl, this is Celeste Lambert, a dear friend of mine."

Celeste nodded at Komeda and extended a hand. "A pleasure, Mrs. Komeda. I love reading *The Butterfly Factor*."

"Oh!" Komeda smiled in genuine pleasure and shook Celete's hand. "I'm so happy to meet people who enjoy my work."

"I've been hoping for a sequel. Any plans?"

The two women took off on the topic, and Will stood listening with the Crawfords and Karl. After a while, Mark and Henry both nudged their way back into the group. It was clear that they were really there to try to speak with Celeste.

"You know Celeste Lambert?" Henry asked Will quietly, far more interested in the empath now than he had been in the past half hour.

"She's my landlord," Will quipped.

"Landlord?"

"Ah, I stayed at Edgemoore Estate for a while, and she offered to sell me one of the guest houses on the grounds after our daughter was born."

Mark snorted. "I can't imagine picturing Hannibal with a child."

"Yes," Will quipped, irritated with the man, "that does take imagination to picture."

That pulled the two women from their conversation, and while Komeda quickly hid a smile, Celeste didn't bother. Instead, wine-red lips curled in malicious pleasure as the woman tipped her flute of champagne in Will's direction.

"That it does," she said pleasantly. Then, before Mark could retaliate, she continued. "After all, Hannibal is an exceedingly particular individual regarding his closest friends. I doubt he suffers fools in his home for longer than a meal."

Will bit back a snigger and glanced around the room for an escape. As entertaining as watching Celeste tear high brows down was, keeping up the farce of social pleasantries was tiring. There was very little port to be found in the storm of strangers surrounding him. Most of these people were content to pass judgment without even attempting to speak with him, and, unlike Will, they didn't possess the ability to understand a person by merely meeting their gaze. Bella and Jack watched the interplay silently, knowing better than to get involved when Celeste decided to defend Will. Neither of them would likely be enough of a distraction anyway.

"I just find it difficult to believe that Hannibal would suddenly change his mind about something like that."

"What is your exact insinuation?" Will challenged the man, words sharp. "That he was entrapped or that he was cuckolded?"

That he'd lasted against the unsubtle jabs as long as he had was because he didn't want to ruin this for Hannibal. The doctor lived for the performance and had put so much effort into arranging the evening. Weeks worth of work with Bella would be for nothing if Will lost his temper and either left or, worse, verbally ripped one of Hannibal's prized guests to pieces.

The group seemed to realize the minefield they'd stepped into because the awkward pause lasted for quite a while until Komeda took pity on the others and changed the topic. Still, the

conversation remained stilted, so Will took the chance and bowed out, claiming he needed to check on the caterers. Celeste, the Komedas, and the Crawfords shot him knowing looks but kept silent as he retreated.

He slipped out of the living room and went down the hall to the study. It was quiet and empty like he knew it would be, and Will sat on the couch and breathed for several, very long minutes. He knew he couldn't remain gone for long, dinner was about ready, and it couldn't start without him. Still, Will needed this brief respite. Not even an hour in, and he felt worn. He could have fled upstairs to the nursery where Braelyn was sleeping, but Will knew he wouldn't have returned if he did.

After a few deep breaths, he glanced at the mantle. New pictures had been added in the months since their reunion dinner. First, there were a couple from Christmas morning, Abigail holding Braelyn on the floor by the tree and another of Will and Hannibal curled up on the couch. Then, there was one from Thanksgiving, them all, including Celeste, around the dining table, smiling at the camera.

Will's favorite, though, was the one with Hannibal and Braelyn lying on Will's bed, both fast asleep. The little girl was splayed out on her monster-father's chest, her fists tangled in the man's rumpled shirt. Her face turned to the camera, dark curls falling across her forehead and eyelashes. One of Hannibal's large hands rested on their daughter's back, keeping her safe even in slumber.

He stood without realizing it and only returned to himself when he picked the frame up to see the picture up close.

Will was truly happy in a way he never thought he could be. Good things like this simply didn't happen to him. And if anything came close, it usually disappeared right as he was getting used to the idea of it. But here he was, a year after BG's birth, eighteen months of freedom, and he was as happy now as he was back at the beginning. If anything, it had grown. There was an entire support structure behind him now, one that wouldn't erode away because he wasn't valuable or stable enough.

"Will?"

Will was startled and turned to see Hannibal just inside the room, looking at him with concern. He smiled at the psychiatrist before looking back at the photo, tracing BG's plump cheek with a steady finger. Hannibal quietly closed the door and walked over to Will, stepping to press the side of his chest to Will's left arm, which was bent, holding the photo. Both men studied it for a bit before Hannibal turned his head to kiss Will's temple gently.

"I was afraid you had become overwhelmed," he said after he pulled back.

"I was," Will agreed. "I just needed a few minutes to myself before jumping back into the fray."

Hannibal was silent for a few moments until, "You don't need to do this, mylimasis."

The empath smiled again and set the photo back on the mantle before he turned to face his monster. "I *want* to do this. For you."

The doctor seemed to examine Will's authenticity before he nodded, pleased. "Dinner is about to be served. Are you gathered enough?"

Will hummed. "I think so. But, please, don't let the conversation focus on me continuously. I can't handle that."

"I will not."

The doctor turned to leave, but Will called him back. "Hannibal?"

"Yes," Hannibal asked him.

"After dinner, I want to discuss something with you." He continued at the confusion and wariness that sparked in the taller man. "It's nothing bad. I just needed to tell you before I lost my nerve, is all."

The other male nodded slowly before holding a hand for Will to take. Then, the two made their way to the living room and announced that dinner was ready to be served. Hannibal kept hold of Will's hand as they led their guests to the table and only let go when he helped scoot Will's chair in before moving to his spot on the other side.

Another change to the usual proceedings beyond the table extension was the seating. As a nod to the additional guests, Hannibal changed the seating order. Instead of at the head of the table, the doctor's chair was centered on the far side, back to his herb garden, so he'd be closer to the kitchen. Will sat opposite him as the other host, which was fine since he didn't have to look at the erotica Hannibal liked to call art. In addition, their fourteen guests were spread out, with three on either side of them and the last two at the table ends. This way, there was better conversation flow and fewer chances for Will to be forced to engage when overwhelmed.

Hannibal had made sure to sit Bella and Komeda on either side of Will to help keep the conversation going and provide the empath with a buffer. Komeda's husband sat beside her. Jack and Celeste were situated on either side of Hannibal, Celeste as an important guest and Jack across from Bella. The others were spread out strategically to either facilitate chatter or, in Mark's case, to hinder it. The retired banker didn't seem pleased with his spot at the end of the table but didn't say anything.

Once everyone was settled, Hannibal nipped back to the kitchen and then returned with two plates. The caterers he hired followed with their own dishes, and everyone was served the first course quickly. They oohed and ahhed over it and then dipped their spoons. The second course came and went, with various generic topics being discussed. After the third was delivered, Hannibal remained standing and picked up his wine glass. He met Will's gaze and smiled. Only then did he shift his focus to the table as a whole.

"As some of you may have gathered, there is a reason for this evening beyond having the inspiration for it. This is a celebration." He paused on Komeda longer than he had the others but continued on. "As you all know, I am not naturally demonstrative."

He turned his attention to his glass and studied it for a long moment, mouth pursing in deliberation before he looked back up and continued on. When he spoke next, his words had a heavy quality to them.

"I have always been reluctant to admit that I have not had a very happy life. There was a brief time in Italy when I thought I had found a home, but it was only after I moved to Baltimore that I really began to live my life. I am old enough and wise enough now to admit I cut myself off from a great deal on the off chance of more unhappiness."

Hannibal gestured to the table as a whole. "Here sit a great few people I hold affection for. It was a steady process, allowing you in, and one that I do not regret. Still, that is not reason enough of its own to celebrate."

He glanced at Komeda again before locking eyes with a dry-mouthed Will. The psychiatrist smiled then, his face gentling in a way all but a couple of the men and women at the table had not seen before. It held for several beats until the smile fell away. Hannibal rolled the glass of wine in his hand absentmindedly before continuing his speech.

"By chance, I stumbled across the one thing I never knew I had been missing. Years ago, I had a conversation that changed my life. I came away from it with the realization that, for all my acquaintances and involvement in the community, I was lonely.

"Now," Hannibal said, with a sudden levity to him. "I'll freely admit to having my foot in my mouth. In five minutes, I managed to grievously insult the man and drive him to almost quit. A new record, I believe."

The table laughed, Jack loudest of all, hanging on to every word with rapt attention. Never had Hannibal been that open to them. It was amazing to hear him admit to such emotional vulnerability. A few were glancing between him and Will, seeming to know where the psychiatrist was going with this, but they stayed quiet, wanting to hear more.

"I watched him storm away, knowing even then that my life was different. That I was changed. And I was suddenly afraid like I hadn't been in years. I had been so careful to wall myself away. All it took to break that barricade apart was one rude man wearing more dog fur than clothing sweeping into a room and not being impressed by me.

"I've said it before; I firmly believe destiny brought me to that place at that time. I've made my way through life stifled by my own choice, never realizing how unhappy I really was." Hannibal turned to gesture at Jack beside him. "I have silently thanked Jack numerous times

over the past couple of years. Without him, I do not believe I would have ever had the blessing of meeting my soulmate."

Will's breath caught at that, and he felt his eyes tearing up against his will. Bella, sensing his difficulty, placed a hand on his thigh and squeezed comfortingly. Will dropped his hands below the table and grabbed onto Bella's.

"Horrible things have happened these past years. Things that caused nothing but heartache and unhappiness to everyone involved. But, despite the ugliness of it, I am still grateful. Because through the dangers and hardships, I've come out all the stronger. I've been granted a chance at happiness I haven't had since I was a small boy. Call it what you will, fate, destiny, or luck. I'm grateful all the same. Because of it, I can invite some of my dearest acquaintances to my table to celebrate not only Will's and my relationship but also the birth of our younger daughter."

Hannibal raised his glass to Will and smiled again. "To Will, because I'd still be lost without him. Happy anniversary."

The table moved almost as one to lift their own glasses and called out, "To Will."

The surgeon raised his glass a second time. "To Braelyn Gabija, who gave me another chance at a family."

"To Braelyn Gabija."

"And to Abigail, unable to make it tonight but sorely missed."

There was a brief moment of confusion, most of the guests not remembering who that was, but continued with the third toast. Hannibal sat down, the group began the next course, and Will took the opportunity to breathe. Bella kept her left hand in his but picked up her fork with her right and began to eat. Komeda leaned over and patted his other thigh with a small smile.

"I'm happy for you," she whispered.

And it choked the empath up again because the author meant it.

"Thanks," he whispered back, voice thick with tears.

After a few minutes, and mostly done with the third course, he'd collected himself and was brave enough to force himself to rise and lift his own glass. The table quieted in anticipation. He could see that Hannibal's speech had softened many of them to him. While not seeing his professional qualifications, his importance to their stuffy host was now quite evident. There's no double Baltimore's social circles would be hearing about tonight.

"I'm not a people person," he started with. "Never have been, never will be."

It earned a chuckle from Celeste and the Crawfords. The table followed suit a second after, not wanting to be left out of the joke. "For all that I have a gift for understanding what others are feeling, it makes it much harder to understand my own emotions. It used to terrify me, you know, because you can't turn it off whenever you want. It gets to be too much, and it feels like you're lost at sea and drowning."

Will looked down and took a deep breath, knowing he had to bleed himself in front of this group to make things easier for their family. He locked his gaze onto red eyes and kept it there; otherwise, he'd lose his courage.

"I knew before I got my bachelors that I wanted to use my gift to help people. I could do something no one else could, and I felt obligated to use it in a way that made other people safer. So, I got my masters in criminology and joined the police. But there's nothing that can prepare you for what to expect as a cop, and there certainly wasn't anything that could help with my empathy. So, I got lost at sea, drowned a little, and washed up on the FBI's shores.

"I couldn't be an agent, but I could still use my gift to help others reach that goal. So I became a teacher, and I taught my students how to think, how to observe, how to stay safe. I like to believe there are quite a few bad guys out there that will be caught because of what I passed on to those kids."

Jack gave him a strained smile and nodded at that. He and Jack hadn't talked about what happened while he was on the man's team, how Jack abused the trust Will placed in his hands, and how he was still tempted to pressure Will for assistance on challenging cases. But, honestly, Will didn't want to talk about it. It was too late and wouldn't make any difference beyond dragging up old hurts. No need to focus on the past when the future was so much brighter.

"It was still hard, though, and, like Hannibal said, bad things happened. We suffered, and suffered, and suffered some more until it was just too much, and things just imploded. Anyone who read the papers knows the basics. But through all that horribleness, there was a spark of hope."

Will swallowed roughly, and only the look in Hannibal's eyes kept him going. "Hannibal gave me the greatest gift possible, and it kept me going through the darkest part of my life. He said that he never realized he was lonely until we met. Well, I've always known I was alone. I lost whatever family I had when my father died, and nothing I did was good enough for anyone since. And then I walked into my boss's office and spent the most infuriating five minutes with a man wearing a horrible sweater vest and jacket."

The table burst into laughter at that. Will still didn't look away from Hannibal.

"Hannibal was braver than I ever was. Even as horrible as that confrontation went, he didn't give up. He thought we could be friends and did his best to prove it. He spent weeks working his way past my defenses, and I'll always be grateful to him for that. For understanding that it wasn't because I was unwilling. I just didn't know how when I'd been mistreated and used my entire adulthood. I didn't know how to be a friend until Hannibal pointed out that we already were.

"Hannibal said I'm the reason he has another chance at happiness, but I'm not. Not really. Fate threw us together, and he saw a kindred spirit in me. So he did all the work. We're happy together, but he's the reason for it. Because he's a wonderfully brave man who downplays his contributions to the world when they matter.

"So," Will said, looking away from his best friend to glance at everyone around him. "To Hannibal, and his birthday he thought I didn't know about."

"To Hannibal," everyone chorused before Will's last words registered.

"Your birthday?!" Jack cried as he turned to face Hannibal. "When was your birthday?"

"Ah," Hannibal said instead of answering. The non sequitur made Celeste's lips twitch in humor.

"The 20th," Will chimed in helpfully. "Our anniversary is the 13th, his birthday is the 20th, and BG's is the 22nd."

"BG?" Jessica asked, leaning forward to catch Will's attention.

"Braelyn Gabija."

"But that was yesterday!" The woman exclaimed, referring to BG's birthday.

"And I remembered it!" The FBI agent crowed. Bella cleared her throat, and her husband corrected himself. "And Bella remembered it."

"Hannibal, you should have mentioned. We would have brought you a present." It came from Will's right, one of the guests whose name he couldn't remember.

"And that is why I didn't mention it," the doctor explained. "My birthday has not been a, as you say, big deal for quite some time."

"But that's changing," Will argued, quickly pulling support from the people at the table. "If Braelyn's birthday is important, and so is mine and Abigail's, then so is yours. No double standard allowed. So suck it up and eat the horrible cake I'm buying you."

That garnered laughter, and chatter picked back up as the third course was finished. After the third was a more extended break where Hannibal needed to complete a little prep work in the kitchen for the main course and then palate cleanser. While the older man was absent, the group spoke more openly than in the entire evening combined. Will's phone chimed suddenly, and a few people frowned as he pulled it out to check the notification.

"Everything alright?" Jack asked, catching the look on Will's face.

"It's the baby monitor," Will said distractedly. "BG's crying."

"She's here?" Komeda asked curiously, excited even as the empath stood.

Will nodded and slid his chair back under the table. "Abigail is out of town touring a university, and Celeste is here too. We didn't want to leave her with anyone else."

He started to leave the dining room before stopping and turning back. He looked to Celeste. "Will you let him know I'm going to check on her, and I'll be right back? No need to hold up the dinner for me. She may just need a change."

"Of course," Celeste agreed readily.

While Braelyn did need a diaper change, she refused to settle after. He tried explaining she needed to go back to sleep, that her daddies were having dinner with friends, but she was wide awake now and disinclined to remain behind. So, after several minutes of desperate pleading, a defeated Will trudged back downstairs with his daughter in his arms.

Will noticed that not only had the next part of the meal been served, but Hannibal had swapped places with Bella, expecting Will to return with the toddler. That placed him on the wrong side of the table from the kitchen, which would distract from the flow of dinner. It warmed Will's belly a little that Hannibal cared more about BG than his dinner etiquette. Hannibal stood as Will entered and pulled out the empath's chair for him, helping Will scoot it in since the younger man was occupied with holding Braelyn.

"Oh, she's so sweet!" Komeda gushed. BG ducked her head in shyness, which made the woman all the more smitten. "She's such a pretty thing."

"She is," Will agreed. "That's all me, by the way. Isn't it, BG?"

Everyone laughed, and BG smiled at her younger father before hiding her face again. He ran a hand over her back soothingly before picking up his water glass.

Will looked down at the plate before him. "This is not pork tenderloin," he pointed out.

"Yes, there was a change to the menu. It's beef bourguignon."

"What cut?" Jack questioned.

Hannibal paused briefly. "It is a round tip."

"Ah," Celeste said innocently, waiting until Will had taken a sip, "rump."

The reaction was immediate, and Will sprayed the water he was drinking across the table, luckily hitting either empty space or Jack. Will turned his incredulous gaze onto his friend and stared at her, even as BG shrieked with laughter.

"Celeste!" he cried, scandalized.

She simply smiled, her eyes twinkling with humor as she glanced at Hannibal and then back to Will. "Something you can sink your teeth into."

Will couldn't help but feel the blush as it crept up his neck and cheeks. "Celeste!"

That set Komeda off, who picked up on the inside joke and slapped her hand onto the table. "Rump indeed!"

Jack was wiping off his jacket as Bella leaned over to explain things, and he winced in pain. "Good god, I didn't need to know that about Dr. Lecter."

With that, the lightbulb seemed to catch for the rest of the table because they began laughing along with Komeda. Will groaned and hid his face in Braelyn's curls before sighing and turning back to his french rump roast. He tried to juggle BG in one arm, but it was a little tricky with how she clung to him. Finally, after a few minutes of struggling, Celeste offered to take her, but Hannibal beat her to it.

"No need, Celeste. I've eaten more than you. Will can catch up, and we'll trade back. Doesn't that sound nice, Gabija?"

He plucked Braelyn from Will's grasp and sat her sideways on his lap. She perked up at the change in scenery and looked around to examine the room and its occupants. Several of them smiled and waved at her as she glanced at them, and she smiled back. Hannibal fed her a small bite of the most tender meat from his bowl and then wiped her face with the napkin. Will almost said something, afraid the beef was actually long pig. However, he was appeased when Hannibal smiled at him, a silent message that there wasn't human meat in this serving.

"Tang!" BG cried, excited when Hannibal folded the napkin in front of her.

"Correct, dear one. That is indeed a triangle," he praised, garnering a great deal of simpering from the women at the table. Even a few men stared in awe at how he deftly held the little girl.

She ignored them, instead turning to Will and pointing at the napkin. "Tang!"

"She's so smart," a man praised. "And talking already!"

"And what was her name again? Gabija?"

"Braelyn Gabija, BG," Will answered. "We used to call her Baby Girl before she was born."

"How adorable!"

So, that was how it went until the fourth course was completed. Hannibal was holding the little girl when Will finished, and he passed her back to the empath so he and the serving staff could remove the dishes. They disappeared for a couple minutes before returning with bowls,

"We'll have a palate cleanser now before dessert. Orange sorbet."

Hannibal placed Komeda's down and held Will's aloft while everyone else was served. Once a server had placed Hannibal's, the doctor lowered Will's bowl to the table. Will took one look at it and turned to smile up at his partner lovingly.

"Is that a rose?" Komeda asked, bending over slightly to get a better look and pouted. "Hannibal, why don't we get roses?"

"Because it's my favorite flower," Will explained, pleasure leaking into his tone. "I bet he planned this entire dinner around the rump roast comment and something he could make into an orange rose. Didn't you, Hannibal?"

Hannibal sniffed as he sat down and pulled his chair in. "I have no idea what *rump roast comment* you're referring to."

"Liar," Celeste pointed out gleefully. "You and I agreed that you should serve it to keep Will from fleeing into the night."

"Never," Hannibal denied.

"Well," Will chimed in. "You did make me steak and potatoes for our date night."

"Traitors," Hannibal accused. "I'm surrounded by traitors."

Will laughed and picked up his spoon.

Chapter 5

"That was not completely horrible," Will grudgingly admitted later that night once all the guests were seen off and Braelyn put down.

They were in the master bedroom, undressing for bed. Will had his jacket and shirt off and was working his belt out of his trousers. His shoes had been launched towards the closet, much to Hannibal's displeased expression.

"I am glad you did not have an entirely terrible experience tonight." It was said playfully, so Will took it for how it was meant.

"I think I'd enjoy it a little more if it was only five or six other people total and not strangers. I do appreciate you inviting only the ones that would behave themselves."

Hannibal sidled behind Will and wrapped his arms around the slighter male's waist. The surgeon had shucked his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt, but hadn't removed it yet, so Will felt Hannibal's warm skin and chest hair against his back. There was a feeling of lips against his neck before Hannibal pressed his face into the joint where Will's neck met shoulder. It was quiet for a while as they remained in that position before Hannibal began to hum and rock them from side to side.

Will chuckled and moved with the motion as he reached back and ran his hand through Hannibal's hair, releasing some of the strands from the hold the gel in it had. "I'll take that as agreement."

"How can you get to know others if no strangers are at the table?" Hannibal pushed.

"There are strangers, and then there are yet-to-be-met friends. I liked Ellen and Karl." He turned his head a little to meet Hannibal's gaze. "You knew I would. I wouldn't mind dinners with people you know I'd find palatable."

Hannibal hummed once more before he nuzzled Will's neck again and let go. He moved back to the closet, slipping the shirt off his shoulders. "What was it you wished to discuss?"

The indecision rose like vomit. The younger man swallowed it down, though, in favor of removing his trousers and socks. It was a minute or two before Will was undressed to his underwear. Then, without anything else to distract him, he carefully breathed and looked over at his partner.

"I had an appointment with Burnam a few months ago."

The other male stilled, a sudden and heavy silence in the air hanging between them like a thick curtain. Hannibal's back was to Will, so it was plain to spot the tension building in the stiffened muscles. Dread began to flutter in Will's stomach. He forced himself to stay quiet, to remain calm, by the bed while he waited Hannibal out.

"Is something wrong?" The doctor's tone carried a forced calmness to it.

Will shook his head. "No. I just wanted her opinion."

"On what?" Hannibal asked, dropping his pants to the floor before picking them up and discarding them in the clothes hamper. He still didn't turn around.

"I..." Will hesitated before licking his lips and continuing. "I've been thinking about having another baby."

The psychiatrist turned to face him at that. "And that is not something you thought you needed to discuss with me?"

Will frowned. "That's why I brought it up now," he pointed out.

"Only several months after consulting your OB," the other man said, tone pointed. Red eyes were fixed on Will's, sharper than Will had seen for months.

"You make it sound like I went behind your back," the empath accused him.

"Didn't you?"

That shocked the words out of Will for a long moment before he rallied. The instinctual anger was challenging to bite back, but Will did his best. Expanding their family was supposed to be something good. Hannibal loved Braelyn Gabija and Abigail. He had adored the week while Will was still pregnant. So it didn't make sense that the killer was against adding another child to the mix, against living through everything he had missed the first time around.

Will blinked rapidly at that analysis before slightly tilting his head and looking at Hannibal. Just that short break from an impending argument was enough to make the unease in the older man clear. Hannibal was standing straight, shoulders back and head held high in a way that he used to before they reached an understanding. His hands, however, were closed in loose fists and pressed against his thighs.

"You're worried." That the unease was obvious to see uneased Will more than any subtly hostile words could. He frowned and pressed the man. "Why?"

Hannibal shook his head, stubbornly denying what he should know was unmistakable to the empath. "I am not worried. I am upset that you have hidden this from me."

Irritation bloomed again and bit at Will's patience. "You're trying to pick a fight."

"I am not the one that has not consulted his partner on such an important decision."

"I haven't *decided* anything!" Will snapped as he rolled his head and jerked his hands in emphasis. "I said I've been thinking about another baby. *Thinking*, Hannibal."

"You should have consulted me!" Hannibal snapped back, face twisting in a rarely-seen frustration.

"I didn't want to get your hopes up!" Will shouted at him, startling the room's other occupant out of his building ire.

"You... hopes up?"

It was quiet and confused, making Will sigh in vexation. He rolled his shoulders and moved backward to plop down on the edge of their bed. The younger man rubbed at his eyes and sighed again.

"I didn't want us to agree and then it not be possible. I didn't want to take that away from you."

Hannibal was silent for a while, staring at Will with his thoughts hidden behind a blank expression. Then, finally, he moved to Will's side, sitting on the bed beside his paramour. The tiny bit of space Hannibal purposefully put between them hurt. As if the other couldn't trust Will's sincerity.

"And you waited so long because?"

Will chuckled tiredly. "It wasn't ever the right time, what with Chilton, and the holidays, and then this party." He turned his head and smiled at Hannibal. "This evening just seemed like the right time. It felt right."

That softened Hannibal. The psychiatrist looked away for a minute as he gathered his composure and thought things through.

"I apologize," he finally admitted, turning back to Will. "I shouldn't have been short with you like that."

"You weren't angry. You were frightened." Will pointed out. "You still are. Why?"

Hannibal licked his lips and fidgeted slightly in a show of nerves that always bothered the empath. Then, instead of answering Will's question, he asked one of his own.

"And what did Michelle say?"

Will allowed the change in topic. "Nothing is stopping us."

"But?" Hannibal stressed, knowing Will well enough to pick up on what wasn't said.

"But my age is a factor. So is the damage from when they had to cut me open to get to BG. It would have to be closely monitored."

Hannibal looked down at his hands joined loosely on his lap as he thought that over. Then, finally, he seemed to reach a decision because he squeezed his fingers together once and met Will's gaze.

"Allow me some time to think on it," he requested.

Will couldn't help the surprised furrow of his brows and the deep frown that upended his expression. "Why? I thought you'd jump at the idea."

"It is a big decision," Hannibal evaded. "We'd be changing the entire dynamic we've built over the past year."

"You're lying," the empath denied hotly, pulling back slightly. "Why are you lying?"

"Will-"

"Don't *lie* to me!" Will warned angrily, knowing instinctively that the man beside him would try to avoid the truth.

Instead of answering, trying to lie again, Hannibal remained quiet until he sighed and looked down at his hands again. "I..." he hesitated. "I do not think it's a good idea."

Will jerked at that and stood, stumbling back a step. "Why?"

Hannibal didn't answer, and Will couldn't help how his thoughts began to spiral. Doubt rose in him and started to eat away at the self-esteem he'd built in himself over the past two years. All the effort he'd put into tonight, into building a relationship and home for them both, and here Hannibal was tearing it all down without a single word. Was it possible that Hannibal didn't want the same things as desperately as Will? Could the Ripper be reevaluating Will's importance?

"*Why*?" he practically begged.

'What's wrong with me?' went unasked.

Still, it was clear Hannibal heard it anyways because his head jerked up. Red eyes widened as they witnessed the distress Hannibal's silence was causing. The man stood, quickly closing the space between them. He gripped Will's face firmly, palms cupping stubbled jaw and thumbs gently caressing the bones under Will's blue eyes.

"Nothing," Hannibal answered Will's silent question fervidly. "Nothing is wrong with you. On the contrary, I cherish the air you breathe, the very ground you have yet to tread. There is nothing about you that I would deny myself."

"Then *why*, Hannibal?" Will asked again, hurt spilling out despite his best efforts to stymy it.

"You nearly *died*," Hannibal admitted, his forced composure breaking in the face of his beloved's anxiety.

"Hannibal-"

"The risk was always high," the surgeon jumped to explain. "There was a reason why Michelle was so insistent on biweekly appointments. Your age was dangerous enough, but then the severity of the symptoms made things worse."

"I was fine!" Will argued. "Sure, the morning sickness was bad, but-"

"Will," Hannibal cut him off again, expression serious. "If you hadn't stayed at Edgemoore, Michelle would have hospitalized you."

That started the younger man, and his eyes widened. "What? No. Burnam didn't say anything about-"

"She didn't want to upset you. She knew that the staff was keeping a close eye on you and that they'd call her if anything was wrong. There wasn't a point in bringing it up since you were already doing everything possible to combat the symptoms."

"But hospitalization?"

"Dehydration," the older man said. "If you couldn't keep anything down, you ran a risk of harm to yourself and the fetus. In worst case scenarios, patients are hooked to a constant IV to ensure adequate nutrition."

"You didn't seem worried!" Will pointed out belligerently.

"I didn't know how severe it was until after Gabijia was born." Hannibal soothed. He sighed and leaned in to rest his forehead against Will's. "I cannot lose you, mylimasis."

Will sighed shakily and reached up to grip his partner's wrists, holding tightly as he closed his eyes and pressed his head more firmly against his monster's.

"Burnam wouldn't have given me the go-ahead if she thought there was a real danger," Will argued tenderly. "Yes, there are the side effects to worry about, but that's what you're here for.

"Hannibal-" he hesitated. "Hannibal, do you even want another baby with me? If there weren't any more risks than normal, is that something you'd want?"

A painful sound escaped Hannibal's throat at how plaintive Will sounded. But, the man pulled back, looked at Will with unfaltering devotion, and pressed a kiss to the empath's left eye. Will felt the man's surety and honesty in the gesture, and the building apprehension began to fade away. There just wasn't any room in him for it to gain a foothold and root itself in the face of Hannibal's reassurance.

"It is never a question of want, darling," Hannibal assuaged, steadfast. "The idea of binding myself up with you, so absolutely that it creates a new being... a physical testament of our devotion? I would burn the world for such a blessing.

"But I would rather go every day of my life with only the intangible between us than be without you. Oh, mylimasis, my William. Sweetheart, I would burn the world if the world no longer had you in it."

Dampness rose in Will's eyes, a precursor to tears, and he blinked it away. What could he say to something like that? How could Will mount an argument against such a fervent plea? Tiny shivers racked his frame, the love in Hannibal's words breaking the last of the insidious doubt that lingered. Their breaths mingled together in the enclosed space of their hands and faces.

"Hannibal," Will whispered, voice choked and thick. "Hannibal."

"Please," Hannibal pleaded, kissing Will's eyebrow. "I would not be able to live, knowing I damned you for a golden tribute."

Will swallowed and pulled away just enough to catch his monster's upset gaze. He smiled, a watery thing, and unlatched a hand to run it through Hannibal's hair. Then, as strands fell forward into maroon eyes, he moved to press his body against the other's. He rested his face against Hannibal's neck and wrapped his arms around Hannibal's back, gripping the man's warm skin. Stong appendages returned the embrace, pulling Will flush against a broad chest, and the doctor propped his cheek against Will's scalp.

"I won't push," Will said after several minutes of them holding on to each other for dear life. Hannibal's arms squeezed in response. "I won't push, Hannibal. But this is something that I want. Don't pretend that you wouldn't want the same if it were you in my place."

"Will-"

He pulled away at that and laid a hand against Hannibal's mouth, stopping the impending refusal.

"Just think about it? Please?" he asked. "I don't want to fight about this. So, please, don't refuse out of instinctive fear of what-ifs. Just... give it some time."

Hannibal sighed but acquiesced and then disengaged from Will's embrace. "I cannot promise to change my mind, but I promise to do as you ask and think about it."

Will smiled then, wide and bright, and hopped forward to latch onto his partner again. Arms wrapped around the other's neck, and he planted a sloppy kiss on Hannibal's lips. A surprised grunt sounded as Hannibal caught Will around the waist and then a pleased hum at the touch of lips against lips. The psychiatrist pulled his head back and looked down at Will through his pale eyelashes.

"You haven't won, dear heart," he argued fondly.

"I'm not playing a game," Will denied, still grinning. "But I'll take what I can get. I don't want to fight, not about our family."

"Hm," Hannibal squeezed Will's hips once and then let go. He reached up to grasp Will's arms, working them away from his neck and down to their sides. "May we turn in now?"

"Why? Tired of all the pretentiousness, old man?" Will teased.

Hannibal's eye twitched in annoyance. "I am not old."

"So then it's the pretentiousness that's done you in?" The empath clarified innocently.

There was a heavy moment between them before Hannibal let go of Will and stepped back. He looked Will up and down once before he crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. Will raised an eyebrow in return.

"Will?" Hannibal asked.

"Hannibal?" Will taunted.

"Run."

Will tore out of the room, laughing as he heard his pretentious monster give chase. *Things weren't perfect,* Will thought as he dodged around a corner, dropping to knock Hannibal's legs out from under him. The older man grunted and grabbed at Will's ankle as the empath hopped over him. Will avoided it and tore back the way he'd come, bypassing the bedroom and escaping down the stairs to the lower level and its more maneuverable spaces. *But they weren't broken.*

A low snarl echoed in the hallway behind him, frustrated, and Will couldn't help the cackle that escaped. He darted to the side, again avoiding Hannibal as the man sailed past and landed in the hallway on his stomach with a loud thwack. The Ripper twisted and flipped upright, which had Will swallowing roughly, and turned on the spot to face Will. Dark eyes tracked him, the man readying for another attack, and Will grinned across the few feet of space.

Hannibal moved to lunge, and Will dashed diagonally, expecting to just miss his monster. But his monster was intelligent and determined, and the motion was merely a feint. Instead, as Will twisted to the side and forward, Hannibal darted to the side, intercepting the empath. Strong hands gripped Will's arm and pulled, yanking Will back and earning a loud squawk from the slighter male. He stumbled backward, and Hannibal took advantage to violently spin him around, as if they were dancing. Will suddenly stopped, slamming against Hannibal's chest as the other man's larger arms locked around his waist in an iron-clad grip. Will shook the slight dizziness away and looked up at his monster coyly, hands resting against a chest that barely heaved from exertion.

"Oh, my," Will breathed in mock fear. "It appears the Ripper's gotten a hold of me. And I've been so rude! Whatever shall I do?"

His monster snarled and snapped at him playfully, teeth seeming suddenly sharp and elongated.

"So very rude, cruel boy," Ripper growled. "My cruel, cruel boy. I wonder what bit of you I shall take first? Your lungs? So you can't take a breath to scream?"

"Oh no. Not my lungs!" Will pleaded.

"Your legs, so you can't run?"

"Not my legs!"

"Your brain, so you can't think to escape?"

"Not my brain, Mister Monster!"

"What then, rude boy?" the Ripper inquired curiously. "What should I take?"

Will contemplated the question, going so far as to tip his head back and tap a finger against his pursed lips in thought. His finger stilled after a drawn-out moment, and he slid his eyes to meet the monster's bloody gaze.

"What about my heart?" he asked.

The monster's head fell to the side slightly. "Your heart? Do you think it's worth it?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Will countered shyly and dropped his hand to where he could feel the other's chest thrumming with a pulse. "Because it appears that you already have it."

"My cruel boy," the monster crooned. "Such pretty words. Maybe I should take your tongue. So you can't speak such pretty things to anyone else."

"Such a frightening thing you are," Will crooned back. "My monster. My Ripper. My Il Mostro."

Red eyes blew wide at that, surprise flooding the killer holding him. Will grinned and raked his nails down his monster's chest, catching in the thickest patches of chest hair. He tugged a little, a dull burst of pain for the other, and then smoothed his hands back down, palms cupping pecks.

"My Il Mostro," he said again sweetly. "My Florentine Monster."

"Beautiful," his monster breathed. "My beautiful, beautiful boy."

"I thought I was your cruel boy?" Will reminded him.

"Beautiful, cruel boy." A hand rose from Will's face and cupped his cheek. "How long have you known?"

Will pressed his face into the hand and then turned to kiss its palm. "Ever so long, my monster. Months and Months."

"My *cunning,* beautiful, cruel boy."

"I've been waiting for you to tell me," Will admitted and then gave a gusty sigh. "But I guess you've forgotten your prior life in your old age."

Will watched in amusement as his monster, The Chesapeake Ripper and Il Mostro di Firenze both, scowled. Finally, he was released, and Will took a step back.

"Run?" Will asked.

"Run."

Things weren't perfect, but they weren't broken. A bright ray of hope broke through the darkness, guiding them to a better place than they'd ever been if only they'd be brave enough to follow it. Will merely had to be patient and let his monster think the battle won. Then, he would show how thoroughly he was preparing for this war.

Will laughed, loud and happy, as he took off again, his monster racing behind to catch up.

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